What Rankings Measure

It is very tricky to rank institutions of very different nature, structure, mission, etc. But usually the information you can obtain (institutions volunteer to make public) makes it worthwhile to dare to introduce rankings in a country (Provost, private post-1990 research informed university, Turkey).

It is almost impossible to take all appropriate indicators into account, to be sure they are correctly measured, and relevant for all different groups of stakeholders. No current league table of compiled indices is valid enough (Senior Administrator, public pre-1900 research intensive university, Sweden).

Popularity of rankings

Global rankings have become an international phenomenon since 2003, but academic quality rankings have their origins much earlier. Four main periods are now discernable.

Phase 1 (Sub-National/Elite): According to Webster, the man who “invented” rankings was James McKeen Cattell; his 1910 version of American Men of Science “showed the “scientific strength” of leading universities using the research reputation of their faculty members” (Webster, 1986, 14, 107–119). Cattell followed in the tradition of Alick Maclean and Havelock Ellis who both had a fascination with Where We Get Our Best Men (1900) – to use the title of Maclean’s book. In 1904, based on characteristics such as nationality, birthplace and family, Ellis compiled a list of universities “in the order of how many “geniuses” had attended them” (Myers and Robe, 2009, 7). Cattell refined his methodology, and weighed the prominence of scientists employed and the ratio of “starred” scientists to total faculty in order to arrive at a final score. His ranking, published as American Men of Science: A Biographical Dictionary (1906), marked an important watershed. Also in 1910, Kendric Charles Babcock published a classification of under-
graduate training at colleges, on behalf of the American Association of Universities (AAU), “so that graduate schools would be able to know which applicants were best prepared” (Myers and Robe, 9). Between 1930 and 1951, Beverly Waugh Kunkel and Donald B. Prentice ranked universities according to the number of alumni listed in Who’s Who (Myers and Robe, 9).

These early rankings used several “dimensions of quality”, _inter alia_, faculty expertise, graduate success in later life and academic resources, such as faculty/student ratio or volumes in the library. Research was included almost from the beginning because “many universities already considered research their most important or at least one of their most important, functions” (Webster, 1986, 17). This early focus on “distinguished persons,” which dominated rankings from 1910 to the 1950s effectively excluded most public universities, such as Land Grant universities which existed in the West and Midwest, because they were newer institutions with a different mission than the older private universities.

**Phase 2 (National Rankings):** The historical turning point came in 1959 when rankings emphasizing reputation factors began to dominate over those focused on “academic origins” and rankings began to develop into a national phenomenon. These formats relied on the _Science Citation Index_, 1961 and annually thereafter, and the _Social Sciences Citation Index_, 1966 and annually thereafter. The second phase was dominated by Hayward Keniston’s _Graduate Study and Research in the Arts and Sciences at the University of Pennsylvania_ (1959), Allan Cartter’s _Assessment of Quality in Graduate Education_ (1966), Kenneth D. Roose and Charles J. Andersen’s _Rating of Graduate Programs_ (1970), Peter Blau and Rebecca Zames Marguiles’ ranking of professional schools in _Change_ magazine (1973, 1974/5), Everett Carl Ladd Jr.’s and Seymour Martin Lipset’s rankings published in the _Chronicle of Higher Education_ (1979), and one published by the National Academy of Sciences (1982) (Webster, 1986, 121–140). Cartter’s ranking had the most comprehensive methodology and received critical acclaim, selling approximately 26,000 copies (Myers and Robe, 2009, 13), although it did not aggregate departmental results into institution-wide rankings. Its commercial success paved the way for _U.S. News and World Report_ Best College Rankings (_USNWR_) in 1983 whose arrival marked another defining moment. Despite various differences between all the rankings, they are similar in their focus on institutions or programmes within a single national jurisdiction.

_USNWR_’s rise to prominence coincided with an ideological and public “shift in the Zeitgeist towards the glorification of markets” (Karabel, 2005, 514). It began as a reputation survey of 1,300 presidents of four year colleges (Brooks, 2005, 6) with universities categorized according to the Carnegie classification (Myers and Robe, 2009, 17). Its success derived from publishing information about undergraduate education in a magazine with an average issue circulation, in 1987, of 2.5 million readers (Webster,